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ABSTRACT

This document examines the themes of adult learning, generativity, and successful aging against the backdrop of the biography of a Hmong refugee who immigrated to the United States in 1988 at the age of 35, began studying English as a second language (ESL), and continues to study ESL in adult education classes while six of his seven children attend public schools. First, the man's experiences as a child in a French missionary school, teenager in the Laotian army, resident of a refugee camp for 13 years, and immigrant in the United States are described. Next, the following paradoxes in his life are discussed along with the difficulties that they pose in formulating a theory of life span learning: (1) a strong culturally based desire for independence coupled with a continuing dependence on outside means for economic survival; (2) loss of country, home, and kin coupled with the gains of life in an advanced industrialized society; (3) support for public school education coupled with resistance to Americanization; and (4) generativity inherent in his efforts to pass Hmong values to his children coupled with the stagnation of his life as a forgotten Hmong soldier. Contains 17 references. (MN)

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# Adult Learning, Generativity and "Successful" Aging in Multicultural Perspective: A Hmong American Educational Biography

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# Adult Learning, Generativity and "Successful" Aging in Multicultural Perspective: A Hmong American Educational Biography


## Abstract

Moua Lor is a 41 year-old Hmong refugee from Laos living in Lansing, Michigan. Today he studies English as a Second Language downtown, as he has every weekday for six years. He has no paid employment. He receives AFDC money to support himself, a wife, and seven children. If we analyze his adult learning on the basis of his "career" we would say his is a case of "unsuccessful aging." However, viewed in a different way, Moua Lor, through his efforts to impart an understanding of Hmong culture to the next generation, presents a model of Erickson's concept of generativity.

To understand Moua Lor's learning across the life course we must explore the role of history, culture and family. This educational biography tends to follow important periods in Moua Lor's life, backgrounded by social and historical crises which forced changes upon the Hmong of Laos. Moua's learning experiences will be charted through his childhood spent in a farming village; his brief formal education in a French missionary school; his life as a soldier; his flight from Laos and life in a Thai refugee camp; and his new life in the United States, with its focus on preparing the new generation of Hmong-Americans.

## Chronology

1953 Moua Lor born in Khang Khay village. Kingdom of Laos gains independence from the French. Viet Minh troops invade Hmong homelands in northern Laos.

1959 War between royalist and communist forces in Laos intensifies. CIA operatives extend contacts with the Hmong. In exchange for their support in war against the communists, a "General Cooper" alleged to have promised Hmong asylum in U.S. should war go badly.

1961 Moua Lor enters French missionary school. Soviets and Americans increase their presences in Laos.

1963 Moua Lor's family relocates to Long Chieng, headquarters of General Vang Pao and CIA airbase.

1968 Moua Lor begins combat training. Tet Offensive in Vietnam. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and Pathet Lao surround Long Chieng, but fail to capture it.

1969 Moua Lor leaves for the jungle as a guerrilla fighter.

1970 For the first time, U.S. military involvement in Laos is publicly acknowledged.

1974 Last U.S. military personnel leave Laos. 40,000 NVA troops remain.

1975 Communist governments take control of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. General Vang Pao evacuated from Long Chieng. Thousands of Hmong remain behind. Moua Lor and his family escape from Laos on foot. They arrive at Ban Vinai refugee camp in Thailand.

1975-1988 Moua Lor and his family survive thirteen years in overcrowded Ban Vinai camp.

1988 Sponsored by his brother, Moua Lor relocates to Lansing, Michigan with his family. He begins taking ESL classes through Lansing Adult Education. Older children enter Lansing Public Schools.

1993 Moua Lor obtains Michigan Driver's License and gets a car.

1994 Six of Moua Lor's seven children in Lansing schools. He continues studying ESL through adult education.

**Adult Learning, Generativity and "Successful" Aging in Multicultural Perspective: A Hmong American Educational Biography**

This paper addresses themes of adult learning, generativity and successful aging in the educational biography of a Hmong refugee in the United States. Although a tremendous diversity in learning activities takes place in adulthood (Kausler, 1994), often research on adult learning derines "successful" aging in terms of formal educational attainment and career (Featherman, Smith, and Peterson, 1990). While this definition of successful aging is valuable for understanding adult learning among middle-class, European-Americans, it is of limited utility in our understanding of learning in the aging process of adults whose formal educational and career attainments are limited. This paper returns to an earlier definition of successful aging found in Erikson's (1987) concept of generativity--the process by which adult learners devote themselves to the needs of following generations. *Successful aging*, then, can be measured in terms of th social status, career and material well-being of the subject, yet it can also refer to the subject's efforts to pass on something of value to the coming generations. Unlike social status, career and material possesions, a subject's level of generativity is difficult to measure or quantify. However, the ethnographic interviewing methods of educational biography allow for a deeper understanding of the values, beliefs and experiences of adult learners and a reinterpretation of the "successfulness" of their aging.

The concept of generativity provides a valuable lens through which to view the educational biography of Moua Lor, a Hmong refugee. The method of biography, chosen so as to encourage a deeper understanding and analysis of the formal and informal educational life of an adult newcomer to this country, also raises important issues for research that crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries. The use of educational biography as a method reflects pioneering study of immigrant (as well as native-born American) lives by the educational historian Lawrence Cremin (1988), as well as renewed interest across various disciplines in the narrative study of lives (Bruner, 1990; Faraday and Plummer, 1979; and Smith, 1994). The influential sociologist John Clausen (1993) has argued that the study of the individual over time is

indispensable in social inquiry. In the case of Moua Lor, the Hmong refugee, the method of educational biography may not provide representative, objective sources of data, but it does allow the development of an what Cremin would call an "archetype." Such archetypes, or educational identities, can be of great value in setting out the important themes and and problems of adult learning.

The pages that follow present the educational biography of Moua Lor. This biography explores the role of history, culture and family in Moua's learning, and follows important periods of his life, within the contexts of social and historical crises which force changes on upon the Hmong of Laos. Moua's learning experiences are charted through his childhood in a mountain village; his brief formal education in a missionary school; his life as a soldier; his flight from Laos and life in a Thai refugee camp; and his new life in the United States, with its focus on preparation of the children, the next generation of Hmong Americans. Moua's role as a "defender" of a people and their cultural ways is highlighted throughout this biographical sketch, and his *educational identity* is described metaphorically as that of a *rearguard warrior*. Following the educational biography will be a discussion of paradoxes in the adult learning of Moua Lor, and a final summation of what can be learned through this type of biographical study of an immigrant life.

**The Educational Biography of Moua Lor**

The name that the Hmong give themselves means "free people" or "those who must have their freedom." In Southeast Asia they are a people who have lived apart, favoring the high mountains for their villages, maintaining a physical, cultural and linguistic distance from their lowland neighbors. For hundreds of years the Hmong lived under their own rulers in China, but in the 18th century many decided to flee expanding Chinese control. They fought their way southward towards Indochina, taking what few possessions they could carry. Legend has it that the Hmong alphabet was written on a buffalo hide and carried with the people in order to preserve it. However, during the intense fighting, the Hmong had to lighten their load,

discarding either the buffalo hide or their weapons. They chose the former. That is why the Hmong of Laos have no written language.

The Hmong who made the long journey to the United States also traveled light. Their stories of life in the mountains of Laos, the warfare in the 1960s and 1970s that engulfed their homes, their flight to refugee camps in Thailand, and their resettlement experiences in the United States fill few books, few of which are read by the Hmong themselves. Rather, the stories are written in their hearts, waiting for the moments to be recalled and shared effusively with family and friends, or cautiously with outsiders. The Hmong experience is also retold and recreated in the haunting, embroidered tapestries made by Hmong women. These oral histories and tapestries reveal the resourcefulness and tenacity of a people who have survived various attempts at cultural and linguistic annihilation. Hmong adults have learned to defend strong cultural traditions in the face of adversity, and this learning must not be overlooked by focusing too narrowly on their overall low level of literacy or high unemployment rates.

Moua Lor is a Hmong who could not read and write in any language when he arrived in the United States, and who has been unemployed and on welfare for six years. Yet, his lifelong learning process can be viewed as a defense of cultural traditions and an act of survival. From his earliest years as a boy in a remote village in Laos, his "education" has been that of a *rearguard warrior*. He has learned to walk quietly, wait patiently, and shoot carefully, whether when hunting in the jungle or fighting Vietnamese troops. He has learned the importance of staying behind to defend his family and people, in their mountain strongholds in Laos and in a refugee camp in Thailand. He has learned to protect Hmong cultural values and language for his children in the face of the dominant American culture they find in schools. In a Hmong community which values traditions and independence, he is in the rearguard, defending things past for the coming generations. The story which follows explores the education of this rearguard warrior, ironically juxtaposed with the often idealized stories of the Hmong tapestries.

Moua Lor lives with a wife and several children in an apartment complex in northwest Lansing. Their building looks identical to about thirty other buildings scattered over a few acres

near a busy intersection. It is a neighborhood noted for shootings and assaults, yet on a sunny afternoon small children play on the grass between the buildings. One child, who runs with a toy made from a piece of string and a bit of paper, looks up curiously as I approach the Lor apartment. In small patches at the front and back entrances to the apartment are beautiful flower and vegetable gardens. Moua Lor's wife, a short woman with a broad smile, opens the door, asks me to enter, and then disappears into a side room. Moua comes forward to greet me. He is a short, slim, friendly man. Although he is patient when answering my questions, he is capable of quick movements to assist family members or friends who enter the house at intervals during our visit.

The apartment is sparsely furnished. There is a well-worn couch, a few chairs and a table. There are a few children's drawings and several photographs adorning the walls. One of the photographs shows a man in military uniform: He is Vang Pao, who was the Hmong commander in northern Laos until he fled the country in 1975. Like many former Hmong soldiers, Moua Lor's allegiance to Vang Pao remains strong.

Moua's life, like all lives, is filled with unique experiences; nevertheless, his lifespan learning cannot be understood without reference to the social, historical and cultural contexts of his existence. His was the cohort of Lao Hmong who witnessed the end of independent village life in the mountains, who fought to defend their homeland and lost, and whose adult years have been spent mostly in refugee camps in Thailand and housing projects in the United States. Surrounded by a strange culture and language, largely dependent on others for economic survival, Hmong men such a Moua Lor nevertheless continue to fight a rearguard action: They provide a wall of resistance behind which their children can adapt to the ways of this new land while at the same time being surrounded by the cultural values and language of the Hmong community in exile.

*Paradise Lost*

*A Hmong tapestry hangs on the wall in our bedroom, the gift of one of my first Laotian students in Minneapolis. It is a scene of paradise, embroidered against a dark blue background:*

*In the foreground are red and pink flowers in bloom, dove-like birds nestling eggs, a doe with her fawn, a mother bear with her cub, snails amid the mushrooms. In the center of the scene is a pool of water with water lillies in bloom. Deer, a fox and a leopard drink peacefully together. In the background, on either side are two fruit trees, one full of birds, the other of monkeys. At the foot of the trees, squirrels and porcupines feed. In the top part of the scene is a mountain with many caves, and two deer lying down together at its top. The embroidered colors are the vibrant colors of the Laotian jungle; the overall sense of the scene is one of harmony, peace and plentitude. Noticeably absent are the unquiet ones, the human beings.*

When I meet Moua Lor he is just returned from a hunting trip in western Michigan. He tells me that hunting was one of the important skills taught to young boys in Kham Khay, the village in the mountains of northern Laos where Moua was born. Moua remembers the first time his father took him out hunting in the forest. He was taught to walk quietly, to be observant, and to be patient; he was not to shoot until he saw the head and feet of the animal he was hunting. Moua enjoyed hunting and was quite good at it. Moreover, his "woodcraft" would serve him well later, when the war intensified in his homeland, when he was sometimes the hunter, sometimes the prey.

Moua's parents, like other villagers, survived by farming, hunting and fishing. The farming method was slash and burn: several acres would be cleared on the side of the mountain, crops would be grown for a few years, and then farmers would move on to another site, allowing the land to regenerate. There would be separate fields to raise rice, corn, and vegetables; cattle, pigs, water buffalo, horses and other livestock were raised. The entire family would be involved in the management of these farms. A few hours before dawn Moua and his family would rise, cook and eat breakfast, and then head out to the fields. Typically they would work until sundown. Moua learned the complexities of growing rice, corn and other vegetables, as well as animal husbandry, from the older members of his extended family. Moreover, he learned of

self-sufficience: If there was a good harvest, the family prospered; if the harvest was poor, the family members had to endure on their own, expecting help from no one. [1]

Movement from place to place was a regular feature of Moua's childhood. Some family moves were prompted by the necessity of finding new lands to cultivate. Other moves were prompted by intermittent warfare with the Vietnamese and their Pathet Lao allies. It is estimated that approximately one-third of the Hmong were internal refugees in Laos during the period of intense warfare. Moua learned that forced relocations were part of his family history. As a child, his father told him stories about his greatgrandparents who had fled from the mountains of southern China. They moved down through Vietnam to a village in northern Laos named Tam Kuc, where Moua's grandparents were born. Later, they moved on to the south of Laos, but finding it difficult to live there, they returned north to the village of Kham Khay. Moua's childhood experiences of hunting, fishing and farming in and around that small village were short-lived. As outlying Hmong villages became war targets, more and more Hmong, including Moua's family, gravitated to Long Chieng, headquarters of Hmong General Vang Pao and the CIA in northern Laos. This was the center of the defense of the Hmong homeland, where many young men would begin their training as soldiers. Moua was not yet old enough to fight, but at Long Chieng he would finally get a chance to attend school on a regular basis.

*The French Missionary School*

At the age of eight Moua began attending classes at the French mission school in his village. The language of instruction was Lao and French, and use of Hmong was not tolerated. For children who spoke Hmong outside of school, it was a difficult adjustment. Discipline was strict in other ways as well: Latecomers were ordered to run three times around the school

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[1] Moua does not speak about opium. Opium was used medicinally by the Hmong and was also their only cash crop. According to Yang Dao, the Hmong were some of the finest cultivators of poppies in the world. Great care was taken with these fragile plants: After the corn harvest, the stalks were burned, and the ashes were carefully mixed into the soil, thus providing additional nutrients for the poppies. This practice of regenerating the soil was only used for the opium crop. The freedom to grow opium for the market, without paying tribute to local warlords, was probably one of the reasons the Hmong moved out of China several generations ago. Was it control of the opium trade that made the Hmong homeland a battleground between competing geopolitical forces? Fearing that Moua will be unwilling to discuss this topic with a stranger, I do not bring it up. See Yang Dao, 1993. Hmong at the Turning Point. Minneapolis, MN: Worldbridge Associates.

grounds. If someone's hair was too long, the teacher cut it. If someone's fingernails were too long, the teacher would crack a ruler over the student's fingertips. "Everybody was scared," says Moua. In this setting Moua studied science and math as well as the Lao and French languages. Lao proved useful to Moua in that it allowed him to communicate with non-Hmong people in his country; French, the language of the former colony, became less valuable when Americans replaced the French as the dominant anti-communist foreign power in Laos.

Any literacy Moua Lor developed in either French or Lao was quickly lost. Like many of the Hmong in his cohort, Moua's in-school education was not really suited to the social, economic and cultural needs of his community (Dao, 1993). Although many Hmong learned to speak Lao with the encouragement of leaders such as Vang Pao, reading and writing had little value in the traditional oral culture, and literacy skills developed much more slowly through the means of a second language. Moua Lor would not learn to read and write until his journey to America many years later.

Moua's schooling was intermittent due to the war, and it wasn't until his family moved to Long Chieng in 1963 that he could attend regularly. Nevertheless, school remained overshadowed by the ever-present conflict. Although Moua today recognizes the great value of schooling for his children, as a young Hmong in Laos in the 1960s, his education came more through his observations and experiences outside of school: Once again the Hmong, in large numbers, were being forced to relocate, and Moua observed the history of his people replayed again before his eyes. He learned the economics of war as his family was forced to abandon their fields to the enemy, and rely on the CIA for food and ammunition. He learned about international politics by watching his hometown transformed into the major base for U.S. bombing missions against North Vietnam. He learned that patience, observation and walking silently now were matters of life and death in forests filled with booby-traps and enemy soldiers. As fighting intensified in the mountains around Long Chieng, he knew he would soon have to leave his books behind for the defense of his homeland.

*The War Comes Home*

In 1968 the NVA launched the Tet Offensive in South Vietnam, and in Northern Laos, they attempted to eliminate American airbases. For the most part these bases were defended by Hmong soldiers led by Vang Pao. In this year fifteen year-old Moua Lor began his life as a soldier. He received military instruction from Thai and American commanders and participated in an intensive weekly schedule: On Mondays, new recruits were taught how to care for and use weapons ranging from M-16s to M-80s. On Tuesdays, they were taught how to lay, and remove, land mines. On Wednesdays, they were taught methods of attack. Thursdays were devoted to general physical conditioning, and Fridays they went on maneuvers in small groups. Moua says that during these maneuvers, "we had to be careful or we would end up fighting each other."

After three months of training Moua went into the jungle to fight the NVA. In the jungle Moua continued to learn the value of discipline, teamwork and patience. The commander of his unit of fifteen would assign each soldier a different job, and that job had to be carried out for the success of the mission. Moua learned to depend on his companions and to support them when they needed his help. He also learned the patience of lying for hours in ambush, or of painstakingly clearing landmines from a jungle pathway. Through his experience as a soldier Moua also came of age as a Hmong adult, taking on a role he would exemplify as an adult learner: He was a rearguard warrior, providing a defense behind which his people could survive and continue. In all, he spent seven years as a jungle fighter.

*The scene shifts...Soldiers dressed in green, with machine guns in hand, approach the village. Overhead, a warplane flies in low. From the other end of the village the Hmong are fleeing: Men dressed in black with large packs slung over their shoulders, women in colorful skirts carrying babies on their backs, all in motion. In the top left corner of the tapestry a few Hmong find momentary refuge in the mountains, and cook over an open fire. The rest of the top half of the tapestry shows Hmong on the move, passing the bright flowers and birds of their homeland, running, walking, heading for the setting sun and the river. Several Hmong are shown crossing the river singly or together in small boats. On the other side, they are met by*

*different, taller soldiers, also dressed in green but without the machine guns. In the bottom left corner, three Hmong are driving a car past a large house. One senses the magnitude of the Hmong's loss in this scene of exodus, yet also of hope: Part of the people have survived, and some were adapting to the new life in America.*

In 1975 the Vietnam War came to an end. In Laos, the NVA and Pathet Lao closed in on Hmong strongholds in the north. Vang Pao and several of his supporters were airlifted out of the airbase at Long Chieng, but thousands of Hmong men, women and children were left behind to fend for themselves, no longer with American support. It has been estimated that about 100,000 Hmong died in a war of attrition carried out by the new Lao People's Democratic Republic and their Vietnamese allies (Hamilton-Merritt, 1993).

As attacks by NVA and Pathet Lao soldiers increased, survival in the mountains of northern Laos became impossible for Moua Lor and his family. They began the long, ardurous journey to the Thai border on foot, keeping mostly to the forest paths, steering clear of major towns and villages. The greatest danger, once again, was the presence of land mines: Whoever was leading would have to use a stick to clear mines from the path. Moua's education had prepared him for the rigors of this task. With patience, painstaking care and woodcraft he and his family made their way toward. After walking one month and crossing the Mekong River, they arrived in Thailand. Their lives as refugees had begun: Lost were home, country and the ability to move about freely. Instead, they would spend the next thirteen years within the confines of a refugee camp.

*Refugee*

Ban Vinai Camp, which by 1979 was the largest Hmong settlement in Southeast Asia, held 40,000 refugees (Long, 1993). Moua had to stay inside a "little house--no town, no country...You could not go outside the camp without permission of the mayor (a Thai military officer)." Many Hmong had difficultly adjusting to a life of waiting within the confines of the camp: waiting for news from Vang Pao, now in America; waiting for papers to be processed so that they could leave the camp; waiting for food to be brought to them. First the war, and now

the war's aftermath, made the Hmong dependent on others. They were alive, but without the sense of hope found in the idealized world of the Hmong tapestries.

Despite the limitations of camp life, Moua Lor found ways to lead a busy, productive life. From being a fighter in the jungles he became an organizer and stocker for the supply trucks which furnished the camp with food and other essentials. He struggled to learn enough Thai to communicate with the officials who controlled access to the camp for truck convoys. Every day rice and other shipments would arrive from the U.S., Japan and other countries, and Moua and others working with these supplies were kept busy restocking food warehouses around the camp.

Although he felt suffocated by the enforced confinement of the refugee camp, Moua Lor did not want to seek asylum in the United States. Just across the river from Ban Vinai was Laos, filled with memories of home and relatives still fighting:

> We wanted to go back to Laos because we had left too many things. We didn't want to come to the United States. No one in the camp wanted to.

Moua's longing for his home in Laos and his desire to remain behind with the majority of his people exemplify again his role as a rearguard warrior. His work with the camp supply effort shows that he was willing to help provide a shelter for Hmong people in their years of transition, while leaders such a Vang Pao led the vanguard to America.

Moua Lor to this day does not seem comfortable with the way in which the United States lived up to its alliance with the Hmong. Several times he has mentioned a "General Cooper" who made a pact with the Hmong in 1959: For Hmong support in the war against communism and permission to build secret U.S. airbases in their homeland, "Cooper" promised U.S. support for the Hmong should the war go badly. Nowhere in other sources about the U.S. secret war in Laos have I found reference to "Cooper", but it is clear that high American officials did make promises to the Hmong.[5] For Moua Lor, waiting in a refugee camp in Thailand, the promises must have seemed quite empty. Messages from Hmong who had made the journey to America

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[5] See Hamilton-Merritt, cited above.

only to find grim survival in decaying inner cities must have led Moua to a growing cynicism about his former war ally.

Moua Lor spent almost one-third of his life behind the fences of Ban Vinai. At last he made the decision to relocate to the United States, under the sponsorship of his brother. He and his family members enrolled in English classes in the camp, and in 1988 he entered the United States with his mother, wife and children, and settled in Lansing, Michigan.

*Life in America*

For the last six years Moua Lor has studied English at an adult education center in downtown Lansing. He attends classes from 8:30 to 11:00 each morning, Monday through Friday, year in and year out. Moua appreciates the cooperative spirit of his teachers, who work hard to improve the literacy skills of Hmong students who are not literate in their own language. Just as farming, hunting and fishing supported the Hmong of his childhood, he realizes that English is the key to his family's economic survival in this new land. He says, "We need money to help the family. We've got to study."

Through these adult education classes he has learned to communicate fairly well in English--well enough to tell me his story. He has also learned how to use a computer and how to interview for jobs. Yet, although Moua says he would be willing to do "any job", after six years he still remains unemployed and dependent on public welfare. The ironies of his cross-cultural experiences are apparent here: At age forty-one, in American terms he is a considered of prime working age; in traditional Hmong terms he is a family elder, past retirement age.

Going to the AFDC office has held some surprises for Moua. He wonders why he sees so many people born in the United States waiting in line for welfare benefits. He says, "They didn't lose their country. They know how to read, they know how to speak." From his perspective, it is unbelievable that English-speaking American people are not working. Paradoxically, he seems to have rationalized a situation in which he and many of his Hmong cohort, raised though they were in a traditional society where everyone worked, are not working.

Moua has learned a great deal by helping to raise his seven children. He suggests that dealing with young children was in some ways more simple in Laos: There were no diapers to change--babies were wrapped in blankets. Like many Hmong, Moua has a number of small children, but he says this has not proven to be overwhelming, because he gets the older children to help look out for their younger brothers and sisters. His six oldest children are now in school. Moua's advice to them is "don't be absent, don't fight, don't smoke, and just stay in the classroom and study." When asked if he is proud of them, he smiles and nods. His oldest son, who will graduate from high school this year, wants to be an architect.

Moua feels that Lansing is a very good place to raise his children. Since moving here he has had the opportunity to visit larger Hmong communities in California and Minnesota, and he feels that Lansing suffers fewer of the youth-related problems. There were "too many gangs" in the other Hmong enclaves, according to Moua. During our conversation, he helps his son untangle a homemade stringed toy, and later, he cradles him in his arms until he falls asleep. As a new father, I am impressed with the ease of his interaction with the child.

While Moua is glad that all of his children have learned English, he does not want them to forget Hmong. "I tell them to speak Hmong (language) at home," Moua says. He sees the need for an education in the traditions, values and language of his people for his children. He wants his children of America to learn about the Hmong world of their grandparents. Once again, he is fighting a rearguard action, encouraging his children to adapt to a new environment , but providing a protective wall behind which Hmong culture and language can flourish.

*The scene shifts again to a day of festival. Like all days, it begins with slop being brought to free-ranging pigs, and feed scattered to a group of eager chickens in front of the house. In the square, children stand facing each other, girls on one side, boys on the other. The girls carry colorful parasols, black, green, red, blue, purple. One girl has a baby strapped to her back. Between the rows of girls and boys a ball is tossed in a traditional courting game. In the foreground a referee oversees a cockfight between two roosters, proud in their red and black*

*plumage. Men and boys gather to watch. Nearby, musicians play the queng, the Hmong flute, whose melody tells a story. It is a new year for the Hmong people.*

The solidarity of other Hmong people in Lansing has helped Moua and his family adjust to their new life. Moua has learned the value of adapting to a new situation without losing important cultural values through his association the Lao Family Community, a Hmong organization. The celebration of Hmong New Year provides a good example of such adaptation. Hmong people living in the northern United States have decided to start celebrating the New Year three months early, in September, in order to take advantage of the warmer weather. The celebration is strongly influenced by the Hmongs' traditional community spirit: Each family cooks something, brings it to the Lao Family Community site, and then everyone shares together. The traditional courting game is played among the children, and the queng players tell a story that the elders still know how to interpret. This community spirit supports the survival of people like Moua Lor; it provides them a foundation from which they can adapt to a new land, a new culture and a new language.

Yet, when one considers the importance of freedom for the Hmong, it is clear that survival is not enough for Moua Lor. The new year finds his life bounded by mornings in the English classes and afternoons and evenings in a small apartment in a crime-riddled neighborhood. The walls that confine him are not the physical barriers of Ban Vinai, but the psychological, linguistic and cultural barriers facing the Hmong refugee in the United States. One gets the feeling that Moua Lor, as an adult learner, is trapped in a situation where it has become hard to grow.

**Paradoxes in the Lifespan Education of Moua Lor**

Klaus Riegel's dialectics of human development seem to be particularly applicable in discussing education across the lifespan for Moua Lor. Riegel suggests that development occurs through the crises of life, not at the times of harmony. Contradictory conditions are seen as the basis for developmental progress. In Moua Lor's development, these contradictory conditions can be seen in several paradoxes of his adult learning. These include: 1) a strong culturally-

based desire for independence coupled with Moua's continuing dependence on outside means for economic survival; 2) the loss of country, home and kin coupled with the gains of life in an advanced industrialized society; 3) Moua's support for public school education coupled with his resistance to Americanization; and 4) the generativity inherent in Moua's efforts to pass along Hmong values to his children coupled with the stagnation of his life as a forgotten Hmong soldier.

Hmong means "free", and Moua Lor has participated in the centuries-long Hmong struggle for political economic independence. He was raised in a hard-working farming environment, and spent years fighting against outside intruders to his family's homeland. Yet, since he was a small boy, he and many of his people have been dependent on outside support for their survival. As fighters in Laos, they became dependent on the CIA for both food and weapons. In the Ban Vinai refugee camp, they were dependent on world relief agencies, the United Nations, and Thai military authorities. Years after their arrival in the United States, many Hmong adults and their families remain dependent on welfare. In Reigel's terms, this paradox is the result of a rupture at the cultural-sociological level, as war, displacement, and unemployment have made it impossible for the Hmong to pursue their independent way of life.

The exodus from Laos depicted in Hmong tapestries describes far better than words the lost world of the Hmong people. Moua Lor's lifespan learning has been a process of coping with this loss. He has lost his home, members of his family, and his country. He fought for years to defend his family and home, but seems overmatched by the struggle to find work in the United States. He also reveals a longing for the lost respect he received as a soldier in Laos, and mentions that, when he meets former CIA operatives with whom he once worked, they salute him, just like in the old days. Nevertheless, his family has gained in many ways by coming to America. Moua is happy that his wife can go to the hospital if she needs to and buy the necessities of life for their family, and he seems very proud of the educational achievements of his children. On a personal level, he seems happy to own a car and know how to drive it. The rupture experienced by Moua Lor at the cultural-sociological level brought on by the war in Laos

has never really been remedied, as Moua seems out of place in the new cultural-sociological reality of life in America. However, in many ways his family relationships at the individual-psychological level have progressed. The family has remained intact, and his children have the opportunity to pursue educational and career opportunities which were never an option for Moua.

Perhaps the things his family have gained since coming to America also generate some concern for Moua Lor. As much as he encourages his children's efforts to do well in public schools, he strongly resists Americanizing influences that enter his home. This is exemplified in his insistence that his children speak Hmong in the home. The more his children succeed in the mainstream American, English-speaking world of public school, the greater the need becomes for Moua Lor to provide a rearguard defence for Hmong language and culture. Evidently, in Moua Lor's home, conflict between family members at the individual-psychological level may result from cultural-sociological conflict between the Hmong community and the dominant American community.

The final paradox of Moua Lor's lifespan education utilizes Erikson's concepts of generativity and stagnation. As a family elder, Moua Lor seems to see his main responsibility as establishing and guiding the next generation. Moua has managed to keep his family intact, under trying circumstances in widely different locales; and he has learned ways to preserve the Hmong culture, values, and language for his children, in spite of many obstacles. Although his generativity is both cultural as well as communal in focus (Kotre, 1984), in many ways his personal life has stagnated. He has been fighting rearguard actions on behalf of the Hmong community all his adult life, and has stayed behind while others went ahead to chart a new course. Today he is a forgotten warrior from the mountains of Laos, patiently attending English classes, patiently standing in line at the AFDC office, patiently waiting, perhaps, for instructions from Vang Pao. So far, the instructions have not arrived.

**Learning from Case of Moua Lor**

The paradoxes present in the education of Moua Lor make it difficult to formulate a theory of his lifespan learning. Moreover, there were language and cultural barriers present

which made it difficult for me, as biographer, to prepare more than a rudimentary sketch of his story as a learner. The reader will note that it is the author's voice, not Moua's, which is mostly heard in this account. Typically, Moua gave direct, short answers to my questions. Occasionally it was clear that he did not have the vocabulary in English to elaborate; however, I feel the cultural distance between us was the main reason for the brevity of his answers. The ill-starred history of his people's interactions with "outsiders" probably causes Moua to be circumspect in answering the questions of a stranger. Moreover, Moua lives in a culture where family and clan relationships are very strong. My questions, layered as they were in the meanings of an individualist culture, may have limited Moua's ability to express meaning on his own terms. Having Moua define the terms of his learning, as Carol Ryff (1989) suggests, could have helped to bridge the cultural gulf separating us and clarified many aspects of his life as a learner. That is, what can be gained from the study of a "case" in the adult learning of a Hmong refugee.

Relying on a single example presents plain problems in method, especially when the researcher does not share much of the cultural, linguistic and historical reference points as the subject (Crapanzano, 1980). The method of educational biography may not provide representative, objective sources of data that are generalizable. However, the narrative account of a single case may provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the life and learning of the "other," providing the reader with a vicarious experience which extends the reader's own memories of events. Robert Stake (1994:240) argues that such vicarious experiences feed "into the most fundamental processes of awareness and understanding." Such narratives could provide educators and community workers with a deeper understanding of the lives and learning of immigrant adults.

The problems inherent with this project seem to indicate two avenues for future educational life history research of immigrants such as Moua Lor. First, it would be beneficial to include as many members of the extended family as possible in the interviewing process, thus creating a family educational biography (e.g., Bruner, 1990). Family group interviews would not only fit well with the group-orientation of the Hmong, but they would also lead to more complete

accounts of educational experiences across generations. Moreover, younger family members, usually more proficient in English, could aid as interpreters, when necessary. Secondly, it is clear that Moua Lor's role as rearguard warrior is only one of a number of roles performed by adult members of the Hmong community in exile (see for example, Conquergood, 1989). Further research could seek to clarify what these roles are, and how these adult roles serve as models for the Hmong generation which is coming of age in the United States.

New Americans like Moua Lor remind us that something is lost when we sacrifice traditional concepts on the altar of "progress", and that as learners, our voyages of discovery may also be voyages of return. Like Moua Lor, we need to identify those traditions which are important to defend, if we would preserve some form of unity in a pluricultural society.

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